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MORALS OF THE RESTORATION

The averted face of the public seems to be turning for the present to Restoration comedy. Professor Nettleton's *English Drama of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* devotes to it some three or four chapters, in which he boldly stands up and says to all the world, "This is a native English product." Mr. John Palmer is bolder still. In his study entitled *The Comedy of Manners* he stoutly maintains that the leading Restoration comedy writers were not only English but the most moral writers of their time. And he proves it to his own glee by declaring that all their immorality was the clear and unsullied reflection of the ideals that governed their associates,—a faithful transcript can never be immoral. To him Wycherley's *Country Wife* is "the most perfect farce in English dramatic literature." To Professor Nettleton it reveals "the depth of his [Wycherley's] moral degradation." That these two students agree in the opinion that the comedies of that generation represented the tastes and the conditions of the courtly circle and its would-be imitators is significant. That they take divergent and indeed opposite views of the morality of the period indicates some misapprehension of the purposes of those writers of comedy and of their attitude toward the life about them.

I

Yet all authorities agree that the peculiar distinction of Wycherley and Congreve is the brilliancy of their wit. Everyone quotes the words of Hazlitt praising Congreve's style as "the highest model of comic dialogue." Evelyn at the time pointed out the superiority of Wycherley's wit:—

As long as men are false and women vain,
Whilst gold continues to be virtue's bane,
In pointed satire Wycherley shall reign.

In 1675 Rochester wrote of Sir George Etheredge:—

Now Apollo had got gentle George in his eye,
And frankly confessed that, of all men that writ,
There's none had more facy, sense, judgment, and wit.

But the significant feature of these men's lives was the part that wit played in securing them social recognition. A few paradoxes were a passport to the most exclusive circles. The curious antiquarian, Oldys, records of Etheredge's first play: "The fame of this play with his lively humor, engaging conversation, and refined taste in the fashionable gallantries of the town soon established him in the societies and rendered him the delight of those leading wits among the quality and gentry of chief rank and distinction, who made their pleasure the chief business of their lives in that reign." Dennis tells the significant, familiar story of how the success of *Love in a Wood* brought Wycherley the acquaintance of the notorious Duchess of Cleveland. He further relates, what is not so familiar, that his wit won him also the friendship of her relative, the Duke of Buckingham, who was so charmed that he exclaimed, "'By G—, my cousin is in the right of it'; and from that moment made a friend of a man whom he believed to be his happy rival." Major Pack specifically avers that "King Charles was extremely fond of him upon account of his wit."

Wit was a passport because it was the coveted attainment of every member of the courtly circle that surrounded the king. The old gossip Spence has preserved an anecdote of Buckingham which takes us back to that era. One afternoon in the theatre, while the heroic play was sloping to its decline, an actress in one of Dryden's productions spoke the line,—

"My wound is great, because it is so small,"—

and then paused as if in distress. The duke rose at once from his seat in a box and added in a loud ridiculing voice,—

"Then 'twould be greater were it none at all!"

So keen was the delight of the audience in wit that it "hissed the poor woman off the stage; and would never bear her appearance in the rest of her part." The Earl of Rochester was admired because "he had a strange vivacity of thought, and vigour of expression: his Wit had a subtilty and sublimity both, that were scarce imitable. When he used Figures they were very lively, and yet far enough out of the Common Road." The

tolerant Bishop Burnet was told that the earl was so extravagantly pleasant when inflamed with wine that many, to be the more diverted by his humor, engaged him deeper in intemperance. Shadwell, in casting about for the most flattering compliment to pay to Sir Charles Sedley in a dedication, wrote: "My greatest satisfaction is that I have the honor of his friendship, and my comedies have had his approbation, whom I have heard speak more wit at a supper, than all my adversaries, with their heads joined together, can write in a year." In his minute and unflinching faithfulness Shadwell records through one of his characters that "wit is a common idol, that every coxcomb worships in his heart, though some blockheads of business dissemble it." His ladies demand that their lovers be "all wit, all gaiety."

Now it is well to note that these leaders of Restoration society did not form their ideals of conversation from English precedents. Rochester spent part of his youth in Italy. He told Burnet that his studies had been chiefly in "the Comical and witty Writings of the Ancients and Moderns," "the Modern French and Italian as well as the English." Buckingham, before he was seventeen, had lived in Florence and Rome in as great state as the native princes, and subsequently spent several years at Paris in the vicinity of the *Palais Royale*. It is the opinion of Mr. Palmer that "for Etherege French was his native idiom. His perfect knowledge of French manners, the French books of his library, his minute acquaintance with contemporary public characters of Paris, show that much of his early life had been spent in France." It is equally well known that Wycherley passed the most impressionable years of his youth, from fifteen to twenty, in the circle of Madame de Montausier, more famous under her maiden name of Julie de Rambouillet.

The Hôtel de Rambouillet is forever associated with the cult of preciosity, which was made to contribute to the gayety of nations by Molière in his brilliant innovation, *Les Précieuses Ridicules*. He returned to the attack many times and helped to drive that affectation from courtly circles; but in its day it was a *sine qua non* for elegant society. It was in fact a European movement during the first half of the seventeenth century. In the Italy which Buckingham and Rochester visited it was familiar in the

form now termed *secentismo*. There are some very instructive passages in the life of Marino, the poet of *secentismo*. On his return from Paris he was escorted into his native city of Naples through an arch of triumph, accompanied by shouting throngs of his fellow-citizens, who at once made him president of their academy. Etheredge was more than familiar with the worship of *bel esprit* among the fashionable *salons* of Paris. Everywhere the cult was characterized by a search for unexpected antitheses, striking paradoxes, and subtle or surprising comparisons. The change wrought in English conversation by the introduction at the Restoration of the worship of wit prevalent abroad was observed by Dryden. He thought it had effected a great improvement over the discourse of an earlier age; he maintained that "the fire of the English wit, which was before stifled under a constrained, melancholy way of breeding, began first to display its force, by mixing the solidity of our nation with the air and gaiety of our neighbors."

II

If we examine the comedies of the period we find the striving for wit reflected in numberless scenes. It appears in *Love in a Tub*, the first of that long succession of comedies of manners for which the Restoration is famous:—

Widow: I did not imagine you were so foolishly conceited; is it your wit or your person, sir, that is so taking?

Sir Fred: Truly you are mistaken. I have no such great thoughts of the young man you see. Who ever knew a woman have so much reason to build her love upon merit? Have we not daily experience of Great Fortunes that fling themselves into the arms of vain idle fellows? Can you blame me then for standing upon my guard?

The display of wit flashed forth in *Love in a Tub* became so much a ruling passion that hardly a play could be written without the introduction of a character to illustrate the difference between true and false wit. In *Love in a Wood* Wycherley conceived Mr. Dapperwit, who is always impertinently straining to hit upon a new and striking comparison, as opposed to the true wits, Ranger and Vincent, who carry on repartee without effort or ostentation. Vincent rudely asks Dapperwit, "But why should you force your chawed jests, your damned ends of

your mouldy lampoons, and last year's sonnets, upon us? We are not all of your gusto." Dapperwit himself maintains the prevailing standards in a characteristically conceited speech: "He may drink, because he is obliged to the bottle for all the wit and courage he has; 'tis not free and natural like ours."

In Wycherley's plays Paris and Sparkish served to establish the tradition that flowered in Congreve's coxcombs, Brisk, Tattle, and Witwoud, all of whom are introduced not only to contrast with the real wits of the play but to add to the sparkle of the dialogue. Of Witwoud one of the characters remarks that he does not always want wit. To which Mirabell, a true wit, replies: "Not always: but as often as his memory fails him, and his commonplace of comparisons. He is a fool with a good memory, and some scraps of other folks' wit. He is one whose conversation can never be approved, yet it is now and then to be endured. He has indeed one good quality, he is not exceptious; for he so passionately affects the reputation of understanding raillery, that he will construe an affront into a jest; and call downright rudeness and ill language, satire and fire."

How absorbing the search for wit was may be better seen in some of the less well-known pieces. In Shadwell's *A True Widow* Selfish is set down as "a coxcomb conceited of his beauty, wit, and breeding." Old Maggot is "a great enemy to wit." Young Maggot "runs mad after wit." Lump is "a mortal enemy to wit." Isabella appears as "a woman of wit and virtue," Theodosia as "a young lady of wit and fortune." The first requisite of a play came to be that it should be witty. Even the prosaic Shadwell complained of "such as hold that wit signifies nothing in a comedy," and a later writer ruefully declared that,—

. . . in this Age Design no Praise can get:
You cry it Conversation wants and Wit.

The industrious Crowne satirically declaimed against the transference of current wit to the stage:—

Oh, Sirs, this is a monstrous witty age,
Wit, grown a drug, has quite undone the stage.
The mighty wits now come to a new play
Only to taste the scraps they flung away.

III

Wit in comedy, said Dryden, consists in "sharpness of conceit." The greatest ornament of dialogue was considered to be repartee, and repartee usually consisted of a see-saw interchange of unexpected similitudes, of paradoxes and antitheses, so phrased as to titillate and to dazzle. But constant surprise and contradiction can hardly be maintained without coming into clash with received opinion. The trite and the banal, however true, must be shunned. The commonplace must be avoided as leprosy. Meeting the demand for brilliancy leads almost inevitably to inversion of accepted relations, to the rejection of everyday opinion. "His wit shall excuse that," says one of Congreve's characters; "a wit should no more be sincere, than woman constant; one argues a decay of parts, as t'other of beauty."

This perverse quality of wit was illustrated in the naughty nineties by Oscar Wilde and the æsthetic movement. His scintillating dialogue derives most of its sparkle from the neat reversal of middle-class conceptions. The conversation of Mrs. Allonby in *A Woman of No Importance* at every word affronts bourgeois notions:—

Mrs. Allonby: Men always want to be a woman's first love. That is their clumsy vanity. We women have a more subtle instinct about things. What we like is to be a man's last romance.

Lady Stutfield: I see what you mean. It's very, very beautiful.

Lady Hunstanton: My dear child, you don't mean to tell me that you won't forgive your husband because he never loved any one else? Did you ever hear such a thing, Caroline? I am quite surprised.

Lady Caroline: Oh, women have become so highly educated, Jane, that nothing should surprise us now-a-days, except happy marriages. They apparently are getting remarkably rare.

Mrs. Allonby: Oh, they're quite out of date.

Lady Stutfield: Except amongst the middle classes, I have been told.

Mrs. Allonby: How like the middle classes!

The aphorisms of Lord Illingworth reflect the same kind of malicious inversion:—

Gerald: You have never been married, Lord Illingworth, have you?

Lord Illingworth: Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed.

Gerald: But don't you think one can be happy when one is married?

Lord Illingworth: Perfectly happy. But the happiness of the married man, my dear Gerald, depends on the people he has not married.

In our own present, Bernard Shaw preserves his position of jaunty intellectual superiority by denying the validity of commonly accepted conceptions. By constantly shocking everyday notions, he is even by everyday people accepted as the wittiest of living dramatists. If commonplace ideas were the same as his ideas, he would lose most of the glitter that now envelops his figure with an electric aureole. How the two fathers gasp when Charteris talks in *The Philanderer*!—

Charteris (stopping him): Oh, it's no secret: everybody in the club guesses it. (To Cuthbertson): Has Grace never mentioned to you that she wants to marry me?

Cuthbertson (indignantly): She has mentioned that *you* want to marry *her*.

Charteris: Ah, but then it's not what I want, but what Grace wants that will weigh with *you*.

Craven (a little shocked): Excuse me Charteris: this *is* private. I'll leave you to yourselves. (Again moves toward the table).

Charteris: Wait a bit, Craven: you're concerned in this. Julia wants to marry me too.

Craven: (in a tone of the strongest remonstrance). Now really! Now upon my soul!

How stunned they are when one daughter accuses the other!—

Craven: May I ask the ground of complaint, Mrs. Tranfield?

Grace: Simply that Miss Craven is essentially a womanly woman, and, as such, not eligible for membership.

Julia: It's false. I'm not a womanly woman. I was guaranteed when I joined just as you were.

Grace: By Mr. Charteris, I think, at your own request. I shall call him as a witness to your thoroughly womanly conduct just now in his presence and Dr. Paramore's.

Craven: Cuthbertson, are they joking; or am I dreaming?

Cuthbertson (grimly): It's real, Dan: you're awake.

The wit of the Restoration largely exemplifies the same procedure. Its effectiveness often depends on its clash with the usual ways of thinking. Those playwrights, too, felt that to deny what our grandfathers believed is not witty, that the clash must be with the notions of fathers and friends, with the familiar notions that create the social atmosphere of the time, that the views which

are in entire agreement with our age do not raise even a question, let alone a smile or a laugh.

Viewed in this light, Mr. Palmer's contention, that the comedies of Etheredge, Wycherley, and Congreve are moral because the authors accepted as unquestionable the manners they were depicting, is seen to be unfounded. The authors knew how witty they were, and tried to invent ever new ways of contradicting traditional English opinion. The close of Wycherley's *Love in a Wood* was assuredly not written in ignorance of middle-class ideals of marriage:—

Lydia: But if I could be desperate now and give you up my liberty, could you find in your heart to quit all other engagements, and voluntarily turn yourself to one woman, and she a wife too? Could you away with the insupportable bondage of matrimony?

Ranger: You talk of matrimony as irreverently as my Lady Flip-pant: the bondage of matrimony! no—

The end of marriage now is liberty.

And two are bound—to set each other free.

No, that passage reflected merely the tone of the courtly circle. That tone was reflected also in what Alithea says of a suitor in *The Country Wife*: "Nay, now, sir, I'm satisfield you are of the society of the wits and railleurs, since you cannot spare your friend, even when he is but too civil to you; but the surest sign is, since you are an enemy to marriage,—for that I hear you hate as much as business or bad wine." Marriage was naturally the favorite subject of ridicule, upon which any new saying was hailed with applause. Sparkish, the would-be wit, bids for such applause in his "By my honour, we men of wit condole for our deceased brother in marriage, as much as for one dead in earnest: I think that was prettily said of me, ha, Harcourt?" And the volatile Witwoud in *The Way of the World* harps on the same string with a defter touch: "Fainall, how does your lady? Gad, I say anything in the world to get this fellow out of my head. I beg pardon that I should ask a man of pleasure, and the town, a question at once so foreign and domestic."

Like the authors of their being, Wycherley and Congreve, these wits were aiming to be witty. They were aping the tone of the town. But is it not obvious that they never would have made such a topic subject for pleasantry if Restoration society had been so unconsciously corrupt as Mr. Palmer makes it out to have been? It was only because of their clear consciousness

of the traditional belief that love and faithfulness accompany marriage that they uttered these witticisms. It was only because bourgeois standards were so perfectly familiar that the circle of Whitehall had an inexhaustible source of paradox. Otherwise much of the most brilliant dialogue in English comedy would have seemed to its first auditors little more than a series of platitudes.

IV

What Professor Nettleton most objects to is not the language employed by the characters but the incidents introduced into the plot. He declares of *The Country Wife* that "Horner, who prosecutes his vices through an assumption perhaps the most atrocious in all Restoration comedy, is Wycherley's real hero. Ingenuity is prostituted in the service of animal passion." Mr. Palmer declares that Horner's "famous project, upon which every situation of the play so brilliantly hangs, at once puts him beyond the cool estimates of morality; and it would be absurd in a critical reader to feel toward Mr. Horner as he would feel toward an actual twentieth-century social figure of Mr. Horner's character and habits. But it must not be forgotten that Mr. Horner is an imaginative reflection of a society that really existed, and that *The Country Wife* was written from the point of view of an actual and definite code of morality."

We cannot but see that Professor Nettleton is speaking from the point of view of 1914. We must also agree with Sparkish in this play that the age of 1673 was very frank. The court circle harbored no delusions concerning its own conduct. Indeed, it took some pride in flouting the moral prepossessions of the middle classes. Its members engaged in wild pranks not merely to furnish outlet for high spirits but likewise to scandalize the citizens. Yet even the most reckless of them, Rochester, acknowledged at times the justice of bourgeois judgments. In one of his letters to Savile he denied the "hideous deportment" with which he had been charged, adding: "I ever thought you an extraordinary man, and must now think you such a friend, who, being a courtier, as you are, can love a man, whom it is the great mode to hate."

The "actual and definite code of morality" that Mr. Palmer finds in *The Country Wife* becomes on a really critical investigation a criticism of everyday standards in that stratum of society. Horner speaks as the mouthpiece of this criticism. He discovers

that the women of quality who talk so much about their reputation are careful of nothing else. He is the means of punishing the worn-out rake, Pinchwife, who has married merely to keep one wench all to himself. He proves the uselessness of ignorance, constraint, and suspicion in keeping a wife faithful. Finally, Pinchwife's sister, the virtuous Alithea, demonstrates that knowledge, freedom, and trust are far more efficacious in preserving a woman's affection and fidelity. The criticism was rude and unrestrained even in that frank age, but not even the idlest spectator could miss the point of the criticism, and the code applied was surely centuries older than the Restoration.

The like is true of other comedies of the period. The acme of perfection in that type, *The Way of the World*, displays the same code. Even the worst female characters in it pay tribute to virtue by striving to preserve their reputation, and the heroine is the affected, capricious, outspoken, but virtuous Millamant. Some of the minor drama is even more distinctly an unwitting tribute to the morality which that age is by some writers supposed to have ignored. Shadwell's *A True Widow* presents as heroines two women of wit and virtue who are at length won by the fine gentlemen who seek them in marriage. Crowne's *Sir Courtly Nice* is a swift succession of tricks to outwit a jealous and suspicious brother who is eventually convinced that "virtue is a woman's only guard." One might go on thus indefinitely. Of course that full-blooded interest in amorous intrigue and that delight in salacious dialogue which is now relegated to the lowest type of music-hall was then an element in the most finished comedies. But it is nevertheless true that Restoration society was not so scandalously immoral as twentieth century indignation has painted it, nor so complacently satisfied with its aberrations from the traditional standards as the devil's advocate would persuade us to believe. Indeed, it took a perverse pleasure in those aberrations. The worship of wit in the circle of Whitehall gave to the attitude and to the purpose of Restoration playwrights, and lent to the dialogue of that notorious period, a highly colored affectation of immorality which, if accepted unsuspectingly, does not truly represent the conduct and the ideals of the London of that generation or even of the courtly circle which the drama was primarily written to please.

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